

# Hatchet

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## D.C. marshall calls fire 'suspicious'

### Thurston not equipped with back-up alarms

by Paul D'Ambrosio

Asst. News Editor

The malfunction of the local fire alarm system probably caused the most injuries in Thursday's early morning fire on Thurston Hall's fifth floor.

"The wiring in the alarm box melted from the intense heat," said Robert Burch, director of physical plant. "I guess the fire was right next to the fire box. When the insulation surrounding the wires melted, that caused a dead short in the system."

Witnesses' accounts of the fire said they only heard the fire alarm ring for from 30 to 60 seconds. GW Safety and Security records also show the alarm sounded no longer than one minute. However, the University's Director of Safety Armand R. Levasseur announced Friday that the alarm sounded 1 1/2 minutes.

"The electrical wiring and alarm system were installed according to D.C. codes and standards," said Burch. "I didn't expect this to happen. If the wires always melted under extreme heat, the codes wouldn't be this way."

D.C. Fire Inspector Fred Brown, however, disagrees. "If the wiring met specifications, it shouldn't have melted. The only time it should short out is when there is a direct flame near the wires," he said. "An alarm system should stay on until someone shuts it off," Brown added.

Most fire inspectors agree if a backup fire alarm system accompanied the primary system, a dead short would not have affected the bells.

Thurston didn't have a backup system because a D.C. Electrical Code passed in 1971 requiring all (see ALARM, p. 2)



A melted exit sign on Thurston's fifth floor serves as a grim reminder of the fire that swept through early Thursday morning. Photo by Martin L. Silverman.

### Warns against spread of arson rumors

by Jeff Levey

Acting Editor-in-Chief

Although District fire officials have labeled Thursday morning's fire in Thurston Hall "suspicious," they are warning against the spread of rumors that the fire was caused by arson.

A spokesperson for the D.C. Fire Department told the *Hatchet* late Sunday that the cause of the fire has still not been determined by fire investigators, and that "the fire was not and has not been classified as arson."

"In any fires with a large loss of property and an undetermined cause - arson investigators are called in," the spokesperson said, adding that arson is also called in because they have a lot more equipment and manpower at their disposal than regular investigators.

"There was a lot of fire on that floor that is unexplained at this point," the spokesperson said. He added that there has been a "tremendous amount of rumors. We've heard a lot of stories and we're asking anyone who saw anything to talk to us."

The fire, which started at approximately 3:45 a.m. and was contained to a section of the fifth floor, had first been reported to have started in either room 533 or 532, the two rooms that were the worst damaged. However, occupants of both rooms say the fire entered their rooms when their doors were opened.

According to Jim Soos, an occupant of room 533 who is listed in stable condition at GW Medical Center, "People are saying the fire started in our room. That's just not true."

Fire investigators said the carpeting outside the two rooms is undergoing laboratory tests to determine if flammable liquids were involved.

The Associated Press Friday quoted a fire official who asked not to be identified saying there is a possibility the fire started in the hallway and spread to the room. It was originally reported that the fire started when a lit cigarette was dropped onto a mattress.

Several Thurston residents have reported seeing suspicious objects in the hallway at the time of the blaze.

(see INVESTIGATION, p. 2)

## Parents, dorm staff fear after-effects

by Charles Dervarics and Richard Sorian

Hatchet Staff Writers

There was a haunting familiarity about the scene at Thurston Hall Friday. Parents and students were carrying belongings down the stairs to their cars double-parked in front.

But there was something different about this scene; in place of looks of relief at the end of a semester, there were looks of fear, apprehension and worry over the effects of Thursday morning's fifth floor fire.

Many of the residents of Thurston Friday

expressed fears about remaining in the building even to collect their things and leave. Parents were worried about their children's psychological well-being.

On Friday, the fifth floor was completely blackened either from smoke, soot or fire. All of the carpeting had been removed along with the vinyl covered fiberglass ceiling panels. They were found in an alleyway between Thurston and Mitchell Halls.

Room 533, where the fire was originally thought to have started was completely gutted. On entering the room, one almost trips over the

inside of a telephone that had melted off the wall. Everything in the room was charred black.

Signs of the dormitory life remained, however. On a bookshelf, books, clocks and cookie tins remained in place, all either burned or melted. A pair of shoes sat on a blackened trunk in the middle of the room. In the room's study alcove other signs of dorm life were seen. A frisbee lay on the floor. On the desks, an algebra book sat next to a melted calculator. Two houseplants were black and withered. Above the desks, the bulletin boards appeared (see DAY AFTER, p. 4)



# Victims express views on fire

by Paul D'Ambrosio  
and Mike Zimmerman

Hatchet Staff Writers

The Thurston fire has left nine persons, one still in serious condition, in area hospitals.

Several of the injured people still in GW Medical Center were more than willing to talk about the fire and the events that surrounded it.

Robert Malkoff, a resident of the fifth floor who suffered serious burns on his left hand and both of his feet said he had no indication that a fire was burning outside of his door.

"I didn't hear the fire alarm," said Malkoff. One of the fire alarms on the floor was located outside his room. But, due to an electrical malfunction in the alarm system, the bell only rang for approximately one minute.

"One of my roommates woke me up," added Malkoff. "I didn't have any shoes on and I tried to walk across the (smoldering) carpet

and escape through the fire exit." Malkoff burned his feet doing so. The doors were jammed, he said, and the door handle was so hot he burned his hand. "I just couldn't open the door since my hand was burnt and the heat from the fire expanded the doors so I couldn't push them open."

At that point Malkoff ran into his neighbor's room across the hall. "Smoke just kept billowing in the room," Malkoff said. "It was getting harder and harder to breathe. Being in there seemed like an eternity. We just had to wait to be picked up by a fireman's ladder." Malkoff explained he realized that his feet were badly burnt when "I couldn't walk down the ladder. The fireman had to carry me over his shoulder."

Malkoff's is listed in stable condition. Doctors have told him he would be released within four to six weeks.

"I just heard it (the fire alarm) for five seconds," said Suzin Farber, another fifth floor victim. "My roommate ran in (from one bedroom into another) really hysterical. I opened the door and ran outside, right into a flame," burning her foot.

"We went back inside the room but the room suddenly started to

fill up with smoke. We put towels over our faces and hung out the window for air. We started to get hysterical and were thinking about jumping," she added. "But, a fireman was able to come in and take me down on a stretcher."

Farber suffered second degree burns on her foot and less serious first degree injuries on her leg and arm. She said, "some plastic surgery might be needed on my foot."

"I never want to live in that building again. It's so unsafe," she added. "All I want to do is go back and get my things."

Farber is also listed in stable condition. She will be released in about four weeks.

Brian Poinsett, who suffered first degree burns on his nose and smoke inhalation, said his roommate woke him up. "I didn't hear the alarm. My roommate Bruce opened the door and I saw smoke and some flames." The room filled with smoke, he said and "the door never got shut completely."

Poinsett said he would never live in Thurston again, though he had already planned to move off campus next year.

Poinsett is in stable condition.

## Senate resolution blames administration

After a highly emotional meeting Thursday night, the GW Student Association (GWUSA) senate passed a resolution accusing the University administration of "gross negligence and inaction" leading up to the Thurston dormitory fire.

Senators and other students associated with GWUSA said the resolution was an angry reaction to comments earlier in the day from administrators who placed the blame for the fire's tragic results on student-pulled false alarms through the year.

The resolution said the University was negligent because Thurston had an inadequate fire alarm system, no smoke detectors, inadequate fire escape routes, overcrowded rooms, no sprinkler system and no system for protecting the fire alarm boxes from false alarms.

The vote on the resolution was preceded by two hours of student comment detailing personal stories of what happened during the fire and feelings about what GWUSA should do. This alternated between calls for the resolution and pleas not to

"crucify" the administration.

Ellyn Kleine, a Thurston resident who opposed the resolution, said, "It's important we don't place blame now; what you have to do is find a way to help people now."

Bob Hillman, an SGBA senator, said, "We're not here to crucify the administration; we're just scared to death of what's going to happen tonight."

Pete Aloe, GWUSA president, reacted afterwards to charges GWUSA was politicizing the fire by saying repeatedly, "In situations like this, politics doesn't matter; we're working to see this doesn't happen again."

## Back-up alarm not required

ALARM, from p. 1

new buildings to have a backup system was not retroactive. "We didn't have a backup system because it wasn't a requirement," said Burch.

The Code does state, however, when a new system is installed in any building, it must meet the present fire and electric codes.

Burch said new Simplex fire alarm "pull" boxes were installed a few weeks ago in Thurston. They replaced the old metal Ellenco boxes. According to Burch, The Simplex system is designed to go off under intense heat. "That's how I think the alarm went off on the fifth floor," Burch said.

The Physical Plant installed Simplex "because I think it is one of the best fire boxes around," said Burch. "I would install it in my house."

Burch felt systems - such as ones that would spray fluorescent paint on pranksters so security could identify them - that would help deter residents from pulling false fire alarms, are "gimmickery."



GW student Robert Malkoff is being treated for second and third degree burns on his foot at GW Medical Center. Thirty-four GW students were hospitalized following the fire. Photo by Martin L. Silverman.

## Red Cross not told of fire

The American Red Cross, whose national headquarters is just three blocks from Thurston Hall, could have provided valuable emergency services to residents of that dorm after the fire Thursday morning. But, the agency was not notified, according to Laurie Lubman, GW Student Association (GWUSA) deputy vice president for student activities.

Lubman said she learned from officials at the agency's national headquarters, 17th Street between D and E Streets, NW, that if they been called, emergency long distance phone service could have been established within 30 minutes after the fire. She added the officials told her emergency shelters could have also been set up for the students.

Plans have been made to establish a Red Cross club at GW next fall because of her discussions with officials of the agency, Lubman said. She added the purpose of the club will be to sponsor instruction on how to handle emergencies like the Thurston Hall fire.

The club will also provide instruction in first aid techniques so that every dorm will have its own first aid squad, according to Lubman.

She added the club will help the Red Cross by providing man power for local emergencies.

- Rich Zahradnik

## Residents urged to take finals

Students affected by the Thurston fire should speak to their instructors about arrangements for completing classwork, according to Harold F. Bright, GW provost and vice president for academic affairs.

"As far as people who are actually injured and in the hospital, I don't think there's any question that they won't have to take exams," Bright said. "I've suggested instructors take into account various conditions that affect people," including emotional upset.

No University-wide policy, though, can be made, he said, "because no one, not even President (Lloyd H.) Elliott, has the authority to tell instructors they can't give exams."

People ought to try their best to complete as much work as possible, he said, "I'd hate to see people with four or five incompletes."

Harry E. Yeide, assistant dean of Columbian College, was in Thurston Friday afternoon answering questions from residents about academics.

## Hatchet

Jeff Levey, acting editor-in-chief  
Maryann Haggerty, managing editor

### Contributors:

Charles Barthold, Paul D'Ambrosio, Charles Dervarics, Maryann Haggerty, Jeff Levey, Martin Silverman, Richard Sorian, Don Treeger, Bob Williams, Rich Zahradnik, Mike Zimmerman.

## Fire cause still unknown

INVESTIGATION, from p. 1

According to sixth-floor resident David O'Brien, he saw "something that looked like a little tin or cake pan" with flames in it when he opened the stairway door on the fifth floor as he was evacuating the building. O'Brien said the tin was just inside the doorway in the front of the building.

Although the University has stated that the dorm is in compliance with every aspect of the District fire and housing codes, the Washington Star reported on Friday that the D.C. Fire

Department has failed to conduct its annual investigation of the dorm. The last official investigation took place in January of 1978.

The University refused to release to the Hatchet a report completed by the Hartford Insurance Co., which holds the insurance on the dorm, after their last investigation Feb. 26 of this year.

The Star reported that an official investigation of the dorm was at least three months overdue, according to Fire Department records.



## Reporter's notebook

## Courageous efforts prevent total disaster

by Charles Dervarics

News Editor

"...Heroism and real courage...those are words that seem so very awkward in our vocabulary...but they made the difference in saving lives." These words of Susan Hoffman-Ogier, resident counselor of Thurston Hall, probably renders the best statement describing the actions not only of Thurston residents, but also of Thurston staff and DC firefighters in preventing a disaster from becoming a fatal catastrophe.

The details of the Thurston fire Thursday morning are known, perhaps too well known, to those of us who live at Thurston. We all recall how shaken we were when we awoke to the screams and shrieks of fifth-floor residents. Those memories, along with assertions and counter-assertions by the University administration, the GW Student Association (GWUSA) and the DC Fire Dept., have already commanded the headlines.

However, the Thurston residents, staff, and DC firefighters that I observed over those traumatic hours are the true heroes of this situation, for the courage and compassion exhibited by these people helped alleviate a total disaster.

One only needs to travel to the decimated fifth floor of Thurston to realize how amazing it was that all the residents managed to escape with their lives.

In this moment of extreme panic, the efforts of the residents stood out. On all floors, students rushed through the halls fervently

knocking on doors to wake up residents. The evacuation was unbelievably quick, and, considering that the alarm shut off after approximately a minute, the performance of students and staff in the dorm's evacuation stands out even more meritoriously.

Those of us who investigated the situation for the *Hatchet* encountered the residents and their diverse emotions—some frightened, some calm, others somewhat hysterical as they hoped some of their friends on upper floors had escaped. Yet most of them maintained their composure while helping others cope with the situation. Whenever they were instructed to move to another place, they did so quickly and without delay.

The individuals I encountered conveyed the attitudes of the students. One girl in tears folded her hands apparently in prayer as she related to a friend how she hoped someone she knew had escaped the blaze.

Students piled up on the grass across from Thurston while others stood on the parking lot. People in a corner room facing F St. on the fifth floor were dissuaded from a possible jump by a united chorus of students telling them to remain until help arrived.

Some who had been saved by the firemen rushed outside Thurston with soot-covered faces crying as they hugged their friends who had escaped earlier. It was obvious that the students found comfort in helping one another cope with the situation.

One memory that stuck in my



GW student Susan Farber lies on a stretcher awaiting transport to a hospital for treatment during rescue efforts at Thurston Thursday morning. Photo by Don Treeger.

mind was the view of four unidentifiable faces sticking out of a fifth floor window facing 19th St. The window was very small and nothing could be seen but these frightened faces. However, they maintained calm despite the impending disaster, and seemed best to convey the actions of the fifth floor residents.

Many students expressed their feelings of helpless frustration at not being able to help those stranded in the building.

However, students had rendered tremendous service to their fellow residents. Just ask any Thurston RA and he'll proudly tell you countless stories of the contributions of "his" or "her" students.

The individual firefighters who fought the blaze also deserve our attention. Some who had trekked through the building rescuing people came outside Thurston weary and groping for air.

Many of those same firemen could still be seen at Thurston at 8

a.m., long after the fire had stopped, helping students and staff recover from the disaster.

Those who had braved the fire and had helped fight it displayed exemplary courage under pressure. Despite the incapacities of a dorm with no fire escapes, no sprinkler system and an alarm system that cannot endure excessive heat, Thurston residents, staff and DC firemen, through their courage and compassion, managed to prevent a tragic situation from becoming a catastrophe.

## Restoration efforts to finish Wednesday

by Rich Zahradnik

Hatchet Staff Writer

Restoration costs for fire and smoke related damage in Thurston Hall have not been estimated, but some fifth floor residents could return to their rooms Wednesday, according to physical plant estimates.

"We've never done this (the extensive repairs) before. I hope

to God we never have to go through it again," Robert Burch, director of physical plant said. He will not know the cost of the repairs for Thurston hall until the restoration is completed and all costs have been determined.

Approximately thirty physical plant workers were in the dorm Friday and Saturday, and all other projects around campus

were temporarily cancelled, Burch said.

One of the first projects was to wash down all the walls and ceilings in the rooms that could be occupied, according to Burch. He estimated the clean-up would be complete by today.

Burch said workers removed all posters and other objects from the walls and lay them out in the

middle of the room, before beginning to clean. He added that furniture and other items in the rooms were covered with tarpaulins before the rooms were cleaned.

The walls of the section of the fifth floor hallway that did not receive direct fire damage had the soot scrubbed off. The walls were then painted with a primary coat of sealer. "The main thing is to get the walls covered to stop the odor," Burch said. Deodorizing equipment was placed in fifth floor rooms Saturday during the clean-up. They will probably be open to residents Wednesday, he added.

The section of the hallway in which the fire was thought to have started will require extensive repairs, according to Burch. Students whose rooms are in this section will probably have to wait longer to return. The walls in the heavily damaged area were scraped of all paint and plaster for three days after the fire. Replastering of the walls will begin today and will take about three to four days, he said.

Rooms 532 and 533, the two rooms which sustained heavy fire damage, will not be sufficiently repaired for the residents to return this semester, according to Burch. He added that the rooms will be cleaned up enough to stop the odor, but major repairs will not start until this summer.

## Two sleep through fire

by Rich Zahradnik

Hatchet Staff Writer

While most residents of Thurston endured the agony of the fire, two residents, both of room 817, missed it all.

Charles Lassman and Bill Kotwas, both Columbian College freshmen, slept through the entire fire. Both of them said they did not learn of Thursday morning's events until they were awakened by friends pounding on their door at about 6:30 a.m.

Kotwas said both he and his roommate were awakened by friends who were coming into the building after the fire was out.

Kotwas and Lassman said they each sleep in a closet (a fairly common practice in Thurston) in their room. They have no other roommates.

According to Lassman, he and Kotwas have a reputation for sleeping through alarms. "We slept through half of the drills (that have occurred this year) and heard about them the next morning," Lassman said.

He added they did not wake up this time despite the pounding of at least three people, including their RA, on the door.



Room 533 of Thurston was the area most badly damaged Thursday. Restoration efforts in most other fifth floor rooms are expected to finish Wednesday, representatives of physical plant estimate. Photo by Martin L. Silverman.



# Staff, parents aid students in recovery effort

from DAY AFTER, p.1

to be black squares; but on closer examination, exam schedules could be seen next to Doonesbury comics. Notebooks and postcards lay on the desk; all were blackened by the fire.

Students began to tell their stories of what had happened to them on the night of the fire. It seemed to be a catharsis for many.

All of the residents of the fire-damaged fifth floor have left the building and are living elsewhere, either on or off-campus.

At least 50 of the students have informed Thurston Hall staff of their whereabouts, according to Susan Herzberg, resident director of Thurston. Efforts are continuing to return the building to normal.

Restoration work has continued since Thursday. The fifth floor is being repaired and rooms are being restored so that residents may move in as early as Wednesday, according to Ann Webster, director of housing.

Webster, in a letter to the *Hatchet*, praised the recovery efforts, expressing thanks to "the many, many members of the GW community who performed so valiantly" during the past few days.

According to Webster, "The instances of absolutely heroic behavior on the part of many Thurston residents will bear remembering for years to come."

She extended her thanks also to Robert Burch, director of the GW Physical Plant, for the "remarkable efficiency" of his staff in attempting to restore the fifth floor as quickly as possible.

The residence hall staff at Thurston had been working since shortly after the fire to help those affected, according to Susan Hoffman-Ogier, resident counselor of Thurston. She said residence hall staff from other dorms have volunteered to assist in helping these students cope with their situation.

Hoffman said they "have been talking to people in small groups and finding out what reaction they have."

"Students will be suffering from guilt about what they did and what they could have done," Hoffman-Ogier said, adding that the residence hall staff is working to relieve the major fears of students, which include jumpiness, insomnia, recurring memories from the fire and thoughts about death.

Students "can't get it altogether," said Hoffman-Ogier. She said that in many cases, it is good for some of the students to go home for a time. "You must go where you have the most love, security and comfort," she added.

One student who preferred to remain unidentified was returning to her home in Philadelphia on Thursday. She said, "There's no way I'll move back into Thurston. My parents are coming down to get me this afternoon. I guess I'll be coming back for finals." She was packing her clothing and other belongings, but said, "I don't think I'll be able to save anything it's all smoke damaged." Her room was on the hallway opposite from where the fire was thought to have started.

Karen Rosenthal was another resident of the fifth floor. She was rescued from the building by a fireman on an extension "cherry picker" ladder. Her voice is hoarse from screaming during the fire.

"I moved into an apartment on Washington Circle that I had rented for the summer and next Fall. The first thing I did when I got there was to check the escape

routes," Rosenthal said.

While she was packing her belongings, Rosenthal told of her experience during the fire. "When the alarm sounded I got up, but when it stopped ringing I thought 'good I don't have to go.' But my roommate said the fire was real."

"By that time it was too late to leave so I went back into my bedroom and went to the window. Smoke was coming under the door so I put towels under it," she said. "I couldn't hear anything from the other room and I thought my roommates were dead. I was tying sheets together and screaming out the window. It seemed like it took the firemen forever to get here."

Rosenthal is disturbed by the GW administration's statements after the fire. "I heard the administration is blaming a lot on the kids. It is partially our fault because of the false alarms, but not all. The University should have fined the people who weren't leaving the building during the false alarms."

The after effects of the fire were evident in the room and in Karen's behavior. She said, "I'm afraid to be here now. I keep looking out the door into the hall

every three minutes to see if there's any fire. I keep seeing smoke coming under the door."

Many parents were in Thurston helping their sons and daughters collect their belongings. Some expressed gratitude, others anger and fear.

One family from Pennsylvania was moving their daughter's belongings to Crawford Hall. The mother said, "Thank god she's all right. Things are just things but a life is precious. I'm worried about the psychological effects this might have on her." She said she would not allow her daughter to return to Thurston and doesn't think other parents should allow their children to return either.

The student's parents don't know if they will file a lawsuit against the University, but said "we'll save all of our bills for cleaning and moving."

Mr. and Mrs. Herman Gordon of Harrisburg, Pa. said, "The Thurston staff has been very considerate and helpful. We'd also like to thank the D.C. firemen who shared their oxygen masks with our daughter and led her out of the building."

Their daughter Sue lived in room 513 said she too would

"never move back into Thurston." She was not injured in the fire.

The Gordons are upset that Sue will have to take her final examinations so soon after the fire. Sue said, "One of my professors is making me take my final next Monday because she is going on vacation. She said I should have been studying all semester and the fire should have no effect." The Gordons plan to talk to the dean about the matter. Mrs. Gordon said, "The professors attitude is not very sympathetic. These people have been under a great deal of stress and strain in the past few days. The professors are on an ego trip. They think only their class is important."

The family hopes to get back to normal soon. "We're from Harrisburg, we've been through flood, nuclear radiation and now fire. We will survive."

On Saturday, the effects of the fire were still evident. As one family was on the fifth floor packing to leave, the fire alarm bells sounded and everyone became upset; the student began to weep.

## GW Student Association

The fire on Thursday morning was a tragedy that has left many students with psychological and academic problems. GWUSA would like those effected to know that we are here to offer our assistance in any way possible. Please let us know if there is anything we can do to help.

We would also like to offer our sincere thanks to those people and organizations who volunteered their services during and after the fire. It is those people who care that have made this tragedy easier for all of us to bear.

**WE SUPPORT YOU.  
AND ARE WORKING TO  
HELP YOU.  
GWUSA**

**Marvin Center Room 407**

**676-7100  
676-7101**

**The 1979 Cherry Tree yearbook will be mailed to students in July. If you ordered a copy but have not filled out an address card, please do so in Marvin Center 422.**